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Short communications

Two new records of the Grey Greenbul *Eurillas gracilis ugandae* at Kakamega Forest, Western Kenya, with a review of its vocal repertoire

In western Kenya, the Grey Greenbul *Eurillas gracilis* is a rarely reported inhabitant of the Kakamega Forest, being represented there by the East African subspecies *ugandae* (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). However, while Kakamega Forest is frequently visited by birders, no adequately documented records of the species have been published to support its continued presence there since eight specimens were obtained between 1959 and 1967 (Turner 2010). Moreover, both the song and call of *gracilis*, as they are known in West Africa, are absent from the audio soundscape at Kakamega, as determined by extensive field experience and review of audio material from Kakamega by many observers (JB unpubl.).

However, two well documented records of the species at Kakamega have recently come to light through the online bio-inventory database eBird. Furthermore, both the call and song of *ugandae*, the latter being rather different from that of the nominate and the *extrema* subspecies in West Africa, are now documented by way of an extensive set of recordings made by C. McBride and D. Moyer at Minziro Forest in north-west Tanzania.

The two unpublished records from Kakamega are documented here, along with descriptions of the vocalizations of *E. g. ugandae*. Media references with the prefix ML can be accessed at the Macaulay Library (www.macaulaylibrary.org).

New Kenyan records of E. g. ugandae

1. An individual photographed on 11 July 2021 by J. Kashangaki (Fig. 1; left) in the north-eastern parts of the forest at Chirobani (0°16'2"N, 34°55'29"E) is separable from the very similar and much commoner Ansorge's Greenbul *E. ansorgei* (Fig. 1; right) by its extensively yellow-washed underparts.
2. A bird audio-recorded on 10 September 2000 by C. McBride in the northern part of the forest at Buyangu (0°20'58"N, 34°51'50"E) was correctly identified as this species. The vocalization recorded (Fig. 2A) represents the call, and is identical to that recorded in Minziro Forest, Tanzania (Fig. 2B). Field observations transcribed by the recordist detail a bird in the canopy of a tree at approximately 10 m in height.



Figure 1. Grey Greenbul *Eurillas gracilis ugandae* at Kakamega Forest, 11 July 2021 (left: James Kashangaki; ML355436021) compared with Ansorge's Greenbul *E. ansorgei* at the Impenetrable Forest, Uganda (right: Raphael Lebrun; ML122562851).

The call and song of E. g. ugandae

The call of *ugandae* comprises a distinctive and rather forceful series of 'schwick' notes (Fig. 2A–B) with a full-bodied resonance and covering a frequency range of 2–6 kHz. These notes can also be rapidly strung together in doublets to form a husky chatter, transcribed here as 'cherrit-cherrit-cherrit-cherrit'. It therefore differs slightly from the higher pitched and much thinner sounding "schwik" of *E. g. extrema* at 3–7 kHz, (e.g., see XC792352) or the similar sounding nominate subspecies, as well as the very different dry rattle given by Ansorge's Greenbul (Fishpool *et al.* 1994).

Meanwhile, unlike the sprightly rising and falling four-to-five note song of *extrema* (Fishpool *et al.* 1994) or the similar sounding nominate *gracilis* in West Africa, the subspecies *ugandae* utters a sombre 3-part refrain (rarely 4 notes) of ascending notes that successively descend in pitch, rendered here as 'weet-wurt-woot' (Fig. 2C). Among the field references for the region, this is correctly described only by Fishpool in Zimmerman *et al.* (1996), who render the song in Uganda as 'HWEET-hwet-hwut', while also drawing attention to its similarity with the song of Ansorge's Greenbul. It is distinguishable with practice, however, as the 3-part song of *ansorgei*, is delivered more rapidly and has a terminal note that is always higher pitched than the middle note (Fig. 2D). The song of *ugandae* has been reported from Kakamega (C.F. Mann, pers. comm., January 2022) but as of yet, there are no known recorded examples from Kenya.

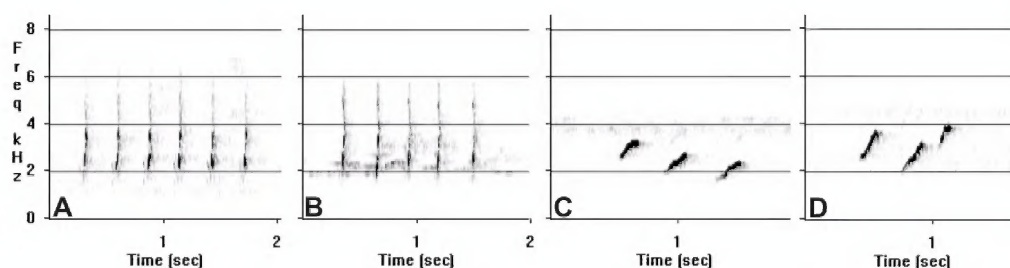


Figure 2. Call of Grey Greenbul *Eurillas gracilis ugandae* at Kakamega Forest, 10 September 2000 (A: Carolyn McBride; ML107878) compared with that at Minziro Forest, Tanzania (B: David Moyer; ML94112), alongside the song from Minziro Forest (C: David Moyer; ML94119) compared with song of Ansorge's Greenbul *E. ansorgei* from Kakamega Forest (D: Jennifer Horne; ML51545).

That *E. g. ugandae* remains so infrequently reported at Kakamega may result from a combination of factors: firstly, the species may be genuinely rare there, or both rare and overlooked. Secondly it may be local within the wider forest, being largely absent from the southern portions where the majority of historic and recent birding effort has been focussed. The two records presented here from more northern parts of the forest support this suggestion. Thirdly, that the vocal repertoire of *ugandae* is largely unknown among field observers has surely been an impediment to field detection, with some descriptions in literature accounts to date being variously confused or inaccurate.

With greater observational effort in northern parts of the forest, and with steadily improving knowledge of the song and calls of *ugandae* among field observers, it is likely to be documented at Kakamega with increasing regularity henceforth. It should also be sought at the Malaba Forest to the north of Kakamega, from where there are unsubstantiated sight records.

Acknowledgements

I thank the credited recordists and photographers for making their material available courtesy of the Macaulay Library. I thank Lincoln Fishpool for some helpful comments while the late Clive Mann described to me his recollection with *ugandae* song at Kakamega.

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Black-rumped Buttonquail *Turnix (hottentottus) nanus* at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy; a first record for central Kenya

The Black-rumped Buttonquail *Turnix (hottentottus) nanus* is an Afrotropical species with a rather scattered and poorly understood distribution from Senegambia in the west to Kenya in the east, Angola in the southwest, and eastern South Africa in the southeast. It prefers open, often wet, short grassland and occurs from sea level to 1800 m (1200–1800 m in East Africa). Its movements are not well known but it is assumed to have both resident and intra-African migratory populations and is generally itinerant in its presence across most of its range (Britton 1980, Lewis and Pomeroy 1989, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996, del Hoyo *et al.* 2020).

Opinions on the taxonomy of this species complex remain divided. Hockey *et al.* (2005) treat *T. hottentotus* and *T. nanus* as separate species based on morphological features, distinct geographical ranges, and habitat preferences, while other authors including Britton (1980), Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire (1993), and Zimmerman *et al.* (1996) prefer a single species treatment. Molecular evidence to support a two-species treatment remains lacking.

In Kenya, the Black-rumped Buttonquail “was once apparently regular” in the Tranz Nzoia area (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996), and Lewis & Pomeroy (1989) refer to two records from there. The first is of the type specimen, collected by C. T. Stoneham, who also reportedly found several clutches of eggs in June and July (year unspecified, quoting Jackson (1938)) and the second is of a specimen collected on 2 February 1958. *The Checklist of the Birds of Kenya* (EANHS 2019) lists the species as historical (“Hist.”), meaning there were no acceptable records of the species in Kenya for at least 50 years at the time of the checklist’s publication. However, this source overlooks three additional published records: in Trans Nzoia County, again, on 25 August and 9 November 1988 (Anon 1990), and in nearby Busia County on 18 September 2002 (Anon 2003). Stevenson & Fanshawe (2020) refer to it as “now very rare in western Kenya”.

On 9 May 2023, while on an ornithological survey at Lewa Conservancy, I recorded the calls of two counter-singing Black-rumped Buttonquails at the edge of the large marsh near Lewa Headquarters (0°12'5"N, 37°27'30"E). Later in the year while reviewing some audio files recorded on 5 February 2023 using an AudioMoth (Hill *et al.* 2017), I detected another singing Black-rumped Buttonquail, this time a single individual. The identity of the birds in both recordings was confirmed by James Bradley, who compared the songs with that of the species in South Africa (see recordings at www.xenocanto.org), finding them to be a perfect match (Fig. 1). The call comprised a distinctive and slowly repeated “oop” note, which was low in pitch and had a muted quality. These recordings have been archived at the Macaulay Library (www.macaulaylibrary.org).

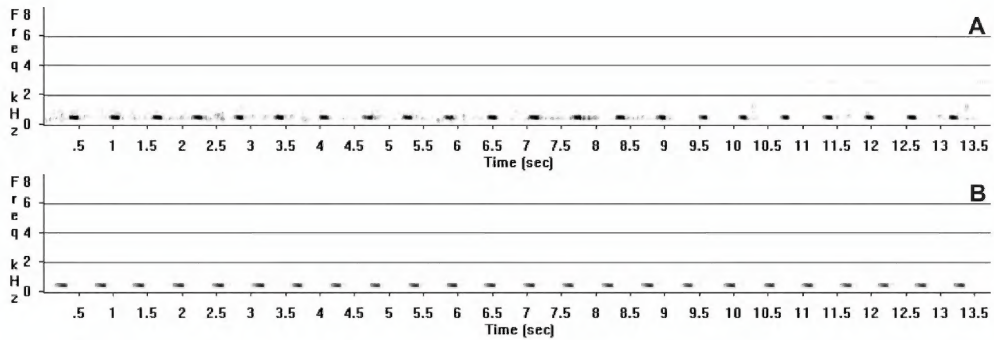


Figure 1. Sonograms comparing the vocalizations of Black-rumped Buttonquail *Turnix nanus* in South Africa (A; XC340941; L. Rudman) with the 5 February 2023 bird recorded at Lewa (B; ML613596431; S. Shema; automated recording).

The fact that the calling birds were present from February to May (and possibly longer than that) indicates that they may have been breeding in the area. This begs the question of whether this species is a previously undetected breeding visitor, resident at Lewa, or whether this represents vagrancy. Lewis & Pomeroy (1989) confer a 'detectability and coverage rank' of D0C0 to this species, meaning that it is secretive, often very difficult to detect or identify, and may be very rare. The possibility that it is resident at Lewa cannot be completely ruled out but given the sporadic presence of this species elsewhere in Kenya, and the fact the Lewa area is well-watched by ornithologists and birders, it is more likely that these records represent an unusual occurrence.

Acknowledgements

This discovery was made while conducting ornithological work at Lewa Wildlife Conservancy with Natural State (naturalstate.org). Matthew Rogan and Margaret Njuguna from Natural State and Eunice Kamau from Lewa Wildlife Conservancy were important members of the team. Special thanks to James Bradley who conducted the sonogram analysis that was instrumental in confirming the identity of the birds. Thanks also to Don Turner for helping to clarify the current taxonomic status of this species.

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Multiple breeding of the Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus* in a single calendar year in Nairobi, Kenya

On two dates in 2012 an adult Spotted Eagle Owl *Bubo africanus* was observed together with a well grown chick (estimated to be between 6 and 7 weeks old by reference to photographs available on the internet) on 18 and 23 March. The adult, together with a chick of a similar age was again observed on 28 and 29 September. On both sets of dates, the birds were adjacent to a deep hole in the fork of the main trunk of a large *Albizia gummifera* tree, judged to be suitable for breeding. They were located on the compound of the International Livestock Research institute (ILRI) compound in central Kenya, approximately 10 km from Nairobi. The authors were resident on the site (ILRI-Nairobi campus) from April 1988 to June 2016 and regularly monitored the area, where the adult with fledglings were observed, but never made similar observations in previous or subsequent years. This suggests that the apparent multiple breeding separated by six months within a calendar year, was possibly an isolated occurrence, rather than a regular event.

Eagle Owls are generalist predators which subsist on a variety of mammalian, reptilian and avian prey. In Eurasia, the Eurasian Eagle Owl *Bubo bubo* reaches sexual maturity in its second or third calendar year and is generally considered to be monogamous, exhibiting life-long pair bonds (Mikkola 1983). Second broods have been reported in the Eurasian region only in the case of replacement nesting, if first clutches fail early during incubation (Mikkola 1983). In sub-Saharan Africa, including eastern and southern Africa (where it has been most intensively studied), the Spotted Eagle Owl frequents a wide variety of habitats. In South Africa, it typically breeds once a year between May to August (SANBI website). It is typically the most widespread and probably most common member of the genus in sub-Saharan Africa, with a distribution extending from South Africa north to southern Gabon and across southern Kenya (Sinclair & Ryan 2003). It was resident on the ILRI compound from at least 1990 to 2015 (R. & A., Bishop pers. obs.) and likely bred on the site. However, the specific *A. gummifera* tree involved in this note was apparently only used for breeding in 2012.

The species is not well studied in Kenya, so its breeding rates could fluctuate along with prey cycles. Interestingly, Spotted Eagle Owls can be very prolific in captivity if given a high quality diet, producing up to eight chicks in a year, with three clutches. Specific pairs of captive Spotted Eagle Owls have been observed to breed twice a year, at least in Kenya, and once have bred three times in a year (S. Kapila pers. comm.). This suggests that prey availability probably limits breeding frequency which can be high given a steady diet. Conceivably there could have been a rodent boom in 2012, although we have no direct evidence that this occurred at ILRI during that year.

Multiple breeding attempts within a calendar year have very rarely been recorded for a *Bubo* owl (Martinez *et al.* 2003). However, some temperate owl species, for example the polyandrous Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus*, regularly exhibit multiple breeding attempts within a year (Mikkola 2013). Our observation raises the question of how frequent multiple nesting attempts may be in *Bubo* owls in tropical countries, or whether this observation represented an unusual opportunistic occurrence. Further work done on this subject should take into account variables such as rainfall, habitat quality, and involve a larger sample size.

Acknowledgements

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A first record of the Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini* in East Africa

Sabine's Gull *Xema sabini*, breeding in the High Arctic, is primarily a pelagic species that is only a rare wanderer to the Indian Ocean (Day *et al.* 2020). There is a single May record of a vagrant to the central Somali coast (Urban *et al.* 1986, Redman *et al.* 2009) and records of wintering birds off the South African coast extend northeast to southern Mozambique (Lambert 2018). It has hitherto been unrecorded from Kenya and Tanzania.

On 8 January 2024 BK and BH observed a small and unfamiliar gull on the beach 18km due south of Malindi, Kenya (3°13'21"S, 40°7'27"E). It was associating with roosting Gull-billed Terns *Gelochelidon nilotica* and appeared to have an injury to its left foot, which was folded backwards. BK and BH photographed the gull and sent the images to JB the following week, at which point it was recognized as an immature Sabine's Gull (Fig. 1.).



Figure 1. Immature Sabines's Gull *Xema sabini* south of Malindi on 8 January 2024 (B. Kanaka).

Field characters that identify the bird as this species include the pale grey-brown secondary coverts (which were heavily worn) contrasting with a pale grey mantle, and narrow blackish collar around the rear of the neck. The bill is all black with a very faint patch of dull yellow forming near the tip of the upper mandible, while the legs and feet are pale pinkish-grey. The tail appears forked and is all white but with black tips.

It seems possible that this individual may have come ashore on account of the injury to its left foot. The January date is appropriate for a wintering bird, although given the fairly well-studied avifauna of coastal East Africa, this record must be considered an example of extreme vagrancy.

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BirdLife International 2013. Species factsheet: *Balearica regulorum*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org> on 14/05/2013.

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